

## Chapter 628

### The Thing You Practise With The Most

It was raining again as a land skimmer moved over the rubble that was once a city. It hovered only a metre over the ground, but that was enough to float over almost every part of the city's inland reaches. A few buildings, once magically reinforced strongholds, had left remnants in the form of a partial wall or two.

"This side of the city was where the shockwave from the astral space being taken hit," Vestine said. She was driving the skimmer but had been quiet for most of the trip from the camp. Many adventurers had secrets, but when she stumbled on them, she did not like being told to back off, which she very much had been.

"That pond seems strange," Rufus said, pointing out a large and oddly-shaped body of water. "It's an odd shape, and doesn't fit with the surroundings."

They weren't going through a park that might have such a pond. Despite the city's annihilation, the location of roads could be determined from the relative lack of rubble, and the pond crossed multiple of them.

"It's an indent left behind by the diamond-rank monster," Vestine explained as she redirected the skimmer to run along the shore. "The monster rampaged through this part of the city, but most of the damage was covered up. The shockwave turned a damaged city into a levelled one. That indentation was one of the few signs that remained, and it was filled in by the rains."

"So, this is where the monster fell?" Neil asked. "It was big enough to leave a crater that big when it died?"

"The monster didn't die here," Vestine told him. "That's a footprint."

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Amos and Jason were floating just above the deck, cross-legged in meditative poses. They were on the training deck as it was raining heavily outside.

"What I am going to show you is the methods of expanding your senses without your aura alerting the senses of others," Amos said, in one of the longest sentences Jason had heard him speak. Amos was taciturn by nature, but Jason was learning he didn't fetishise silence, not hesitating to speak when it was called for.

"You are already familiar with retracting your aura," Amos said, "but that retracts your senses as well. You need to learn how to mask your aura's presence without withdrawing it. You have aura stealth techniques?"

“I have one I’ve developed,” Jason said. “Partly it’s retracting my aura, but I have more subtle methods as well. One that I’m proud of lets me blend into crowds by adapting my aura to those of the people around me, and incorporating subtle aura suppression to make the perceptions of others pass over me. Basically, I can make people ignore me if there are other people around.”

Amos nodded and unfolded his legs, dropping them to the floor he was floating over. “We’ll go to the camp,” Amos said. “You can show me.”

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While Jason was aura training, his team moved beyond the city ruins. The wall that had once held off monsters was now just a demarcation line between city and jungle, no taller than a speed bump. The jungle itself was little better off than the city, with trees uprooted and scattered like dandelion blossoms. Despite the flattened jungle, this was not the area designated the destruction zone.

They arrived at the official destruction zone, where the astral space aperture had been, it was clear why this place had earned the name. It was a crater, but not a concave in the ground. It looked more like someone had attempted to replicate the Grand Canyon with a giant cake tin, creating a circular hole that stretched kilometres across and hundreds of metres deep.

The skimmer stopped and the team disembarked, lining up along the edge of the crater. It was a neat and round hole, with a dark green, glassy surface. The rounded wall and flat floor were polished-marble smooth, but scattered with debris. Rocks, trees and massive clumps of earth lay on the floor, along with what was left of animals and magical beasts devoured by monsters. It was large enough that, in spite of the rain, the water collected inside was not deep enough to consider it flooded, but merely wet.

“That is a big hole,” Neil said. “What does it count as? A canyon? A crater?”

“To think that this is only a fraction of the size it would have been outside of a monster surge,” Clive said, shaking his head in wonder. “If not for the damaged dimensional membrane, this could have covered ten times the area.”

“It makes me think of the astral space you stopped the Builder from taking near Greenstone,” Rufus said. “If you hadn’t, I’d be dead, along with everyone else in Greenstone and every desert village and delta town around it. This place shows just how great the deed you all did that day was.”

“Well, it wouldn’t have affected me,” Farrah said. “I was already dead.”

“You were dead?” Vestine asked, turning to look at her.

“For about a year,” Farrah told her.

“Then how are you alive now?”

“I know a guy.”

“What does that mean?”

“We know a guy who views death as less of an end than as a hobby,” Farrah told her.

“We’re not really meant to talk about it, though.”

“Like that asset of yours.”

“Exactly,” Farrah said. “The asset is something he left behind.”

“It’s horrifying to think that this has happened all over the world,” Humphrey said.

“Most of the Builder cult’s attempts to steal astral spaces were stopped,” Vestine said.

“But most isn’t all. We were lucky here, in that we managed to evacuate the bulk of the population. The explosion erased a town and flattened several villages, but their people had left for fortress towns long before, thankfully. There are places where people had it much worse.”

She spat aggressively over the edge.

“You’re all moving south from Rimaros, right?” she asked.

“That’s right,” Sophie said.

“Did some guy really convince the Builder to leave early?”

“That’s what we heard,” Belinda said.

“Well, why did he take so long?” Vestine asked angrily. “We lost everything, here. Our homes. Our pride. We might have saved most of the people but we still lost many lives.”

“You lived here?” Humphrey asked Vestine, who nodded.

“I wasn’t just stationed here,” she said. “I grew up here. It was my city. And now they’re saying that they might not even rebuild it.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine,” Humphrey said. “I won’t even try. I’ve never been through what you have. Lost not just a home, but the home of everyone I know. Whole communities. All I can say is that I’m sorry.”

Vestine turned and started marching towards the skimmer.

“You’ve seen it now,” she said bitterly. “We need to get back on patrol.”

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“Are you sure about this?” Jason asked Amos as they stood on the dock at the outer edge of the busy base camp. “There are a lot of silver rankers here, and if they notice a cook wandering around under a sophisticated stealth technique, it’ll draw attention that we don’t want.”

“Do you lack confidence in your ability?”

“No, I'm quite proud of the ability. It's probably the most intricate in execution that I have, and it was self-developed. But it's designed to help me pass unnoticed through crowds of lower-ranked people, not to fool people of my own rank. I've got it to the point that it can, if they're not paying attention, but if they are, the technique will draw attention rather than deflect it. It's not a matter of confidence; it's about the right tool for the right job.”

“Good,” Amos said.

“Good?”

“Your aura manipulation skills are barely adequate, but at least you understand the value in cultivating a breadth of nuanced techniques, even if you haven't, yet.”

“Barely adequate?”

“The greater the potential, the greater the expectations should be to fulfil that potential.”

“I think I get it,” Jason said, still frowning over ‘barely adequate.’ “My skills are well above the silver-rank standard, but every rank scales, not just in power but the proficiency of those considered to be the best. The ones living up to their potential. You're saying that if I want to be great instead of just good once I hit gold rank, I need to push the limits of my capabilities.”

“Good, instead of adequate,” Amos corrected. “Master the basics before you start claiming greatness.”

“Aim low, got it,” Jason said. “This is why Dawn came to you specifically, isn't it? She knew you could get me ready for the future, at least in this regard.”

“Yes. Now, show me your technique.”

“But what if some silver-ranker pulls me up?”

“Then use the thing you practise with the most.”

“What's that?”

“Your mouth.”

“I can't tell if that's an insult or a compliment. Probably a bit of both, now that I think about it. Actually, examining it further, I'm increasingly impressed at the nuance you managed to incorporate into a simple statement and the way you both layered meaning and prompted a more in-depth exploration of the ramifications of your—”

Amos flicked Jason on the forehead.

“Ow!”

“Aura technique, not mouth technique.”

“You just said—”

Amos flicked him again, his gold-rank reflexes too much for Jason, even though he was watching for it.

“You’re training an essence user, not a dog,” Jason pointed out, rubbing his forehead. Amos responded only with a flat look.

“Fine,” Jason grumbled as he set out into the camp, initiating his aura technique. “Woof bloody woof.”

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As Vestine had promised, the inland side of the city was more active in terms of monster activity. Humphrey and the others soon found themselves working alongside Korinne and her team, as well as one more group, in wiping out a massive pack of silver-rank monsters.

Arc lizards were among the weakest of silver-rank monsters, individually. Alone they were weaker than upper-tier bronze-rank monsters, making them a popular choice when high-rankers were curating battles for their bronze-rank trainees. As such, the local adventurers all had experience fighting them in small numbers.

An arc lizard looked like a cobalt-blue iguana, with a rough, milky white crystal emerging from its back. Their only real form of attack was an arc of lightning they could shoot from the crystal, but it wasn’t dangerous to a silver ranker. Even bronze-rankers didn’t have to be too worried if they were prepared and careful or had solid defensive abilities.

The problem with dealing with arc lizards was that they never manifested alone and they became exponentially more dangerous in number. Their electrical arcs could jump from one to another, growing in strength with each link in the chain, even splitting once they grew powerful enough. Too many arc lizards gathered in one place became very dangerous indeed.

Arc lizards were monsters that commonly spawned in this part of the world, and were normally a negligible threat. During a monster surge, however, they spawned in greater numbers than normal, often much greater. This meant that arc lizards went from a minor threat into a major problem, and while the monster surge was over, some monsters had appeared in wilderness areas and were still finding their way to population centres. Unlike short-lived iron-rank monsters, those of silver rank could easily last until the next surge, if not dealt with in the interim.

With multiple packs of arc lizards having found each other, they posed a major threat to the three teams sent to eliminate them. The key was to strike hard, strike fast and deliver definitive damage. The earliest parts of the battle were most dangerous, with the

lizards at their strongest. The healers on each team proved their mettle in the face of the prolific and powerful attacks, although the teams had gone in prepared.

Knowing what they were going to confront, their Adventure Society guides had prepared potions to resist electricity for each of the teams. Even so, the potions only went so far in the face of multitudinous powerful attacks, which overwhelmed magical shields and burnt through armour to scorch flesh. Only as their numbers reduced did the attacks of the lizards diminish in potency, making things easier after the harrowing start to the battle.

Korinne's team was the unquestionable star of the show, clearing out enemies faster than either of the other teams. Their specialisation was built around a pair of high-damage members with the rest of the team built around maximising their effectiveness. This made them something of a reflection of the lizards themselves as they focused all their efforts on unleashing powerful attacks. They even used the same chain lightning, with Kalif firing electric arrows that split and split, amplifying their power with each enemy struck.

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"You'd think that electric arrows would be a bad choice against electric monsters," Sophie said as the teams rested in the aftermath of the battle.

"Silver rank is where power sets start to cover their own weaknesses," Farrah explained. "Take mine, for example. I have an ability called Child of Fire that helps me penetrate resistance to heat and fire, and even affect things that are immune. I'll need to be higher rank before I start burning fire elementals to death, but I'll get there."

"The same goes for me," Humphrey said. "I don't use fire as much as Farrah, but my Dragon Might aura transforms my regular fire into dragon fire, which is much more effective."

"It's the same for anything," Farrah said. "Korinne's lightning is the same, I imagine, but look at Jason: he can make a golem bleed now."

"This is part of what makes essence users stronger than those with inherent magic," Rufus said. "With so many powers, our abilities have breadth and synergy, but they also grow to cover our weaknesses. Very few of those with inherent magic can compare to a high-rank essence user. Of those that come close, it usually requires years of training and practise."

"Like the blood magic of the intelligent troll tribes," Clive said. "Even then, they're mostly working with variant ritual magic. That's hard to use practically in combat; take it from a combat ritualist."

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Korinne's team were having their own discussion of the battle's context.

"I don't see what's so special about their team that we need to follow them around and learn things," Polix said. "We showed them up today."

"This isn't the fight we need to learn from them in," Korinne said. "This battle was exactly the right kind of fight for us. A simple, if powerful enemy, in a large group setting. I hope you noticed how the other teams saw that we were the cornerstone of the group and pivoted their strategies to let us work uninterrupted. They shepherded the lizards away from us so we could maintain our offence without needing to beat-back counterattacks."

"That's what I'm saying," Polix said. "They are the ones who saw that we were the stronger team."

"Polix," Korinne said, "you need to listen to everything I saw, not just the parts you agree with. We were strong today because it was our kind of fight. What Geller's team has is experience with things going wrong and working just as a team, instead of as part of a group expedition."

"The difference between adventuring approaches in Rimaros and Vitesse," Rosa said.

Polix groaned.

"I'm sick of hearing arguments about one being better than the other," he complained. "It's obvious."

"So I thought myself," Korinne said. "I was taught that the Rimaros way is the superior option as well, but I've been discussing this with Orin's uncle since we came along on this journey. He pushed me to look past my own biases."

"You talked with Lord Amos?" Kalif asked. "Did he use words? With his mouth?"

"He's not a mute, Kalif," Korinne said. "He just doesn't believe in talking when it isn't necessary. An all-too-rare virtue."

"What did he say about the difference between adventuring in Rimaros and Vitesse?" Rosa asked.

"He told me that it's a difference in wider doctrine," Korinne explained. "The Sea of Storms and its surrounding region has massive tracts of undeveloped jungle and deep water. Vast leviathans and whole colonies of monsters can disappear for decades, often finding one another and grouping up before they ever move on a populated area. Because of this, the threats encountered in this region are massive, like this pack of arc lizards. As such, adventuring doctrine in this part of the world accommodates the nature of those threats by putting a large emphasis on multi-team expeditions. And when people work together but in multiple teams, it makes sense that each team has a speciality."

“You’re saying that it’s the Vitesse approach, but scaled up?” Kalif asked. “Instead of a team where the individual members do their own thing, we have expeditions where each team does its own thing.”

“Precisely,” Korinne said. “Vitesse is a much more developed region, which means the monster detection coverage is more comprehensive. Threats building up in the wilderness before being detected is rare, so teams are much more likely to operate independently, and there are even people that work alone. They don’t have other teams to cover them while they focus on just one thing. They have to rely on themselves, which means they need the ability to adapt. Working with another team that covers their weakness isn’t an option. They have to be able to cover their own, even if that comes at the cost of focus.”

“I don’t see the point,” Polix said. “If the threat is smaller, then our teams can just kill it before it does anything tricky with our overwhelming power. No versatility required.”

“And that attitude,” Korinne said, “is the exact reason we need to follow them around and learn things.”